You Tell Me How to Run a Railroad

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What the remark about his lack of experience indicated to Canadians was simply that their man Gordon was right in the groove. They had heard the line before, notably when he first appeared in the national spotlight in 1941 as chairman of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, Canada's OPA. On October 18th of that year, Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced the government's decision to lay on an across-the-house *price ceiling*. "Then," says Gordon, "having shown everybody their shiny red wagon, they led in the horse. I was the horse."

His first statement as prices boss, made to Ottawa correspondents at one of the briefest press conferences in history, was completely in character. "Everybody might just as well go on home while I think this thing through," he said. "Down to here I don't know anything about price ceilings, or how you make them work."

A Summons to Publishers

What happened after his thought processes had been exercised revealed a natural instinct for public relations which not even long years in government service has dulled. Instead of releasing a handout, or holding a run-of-mill meeting press conference, Gordon wired every newspaper and magazine owner in the country to come to the capital for a meeting "in the national interest."

When the session opened, the Prime Minister led off. At first he had demurred, contending that the meeting was purely to explain policy, and the chairman of the Prices Board was the one to do that. "Look," replied Gordon, "a lot of these fellows are traveling an awfully long way to come to this affair. Somebody's got to put on a show for them. That means you, sir." Unaccustomed though he was to such blunt advice, the Prime Minister moved into the act.

After the visitors had been suitably impressed by Prime Minister King's welcome, Gordon gave the publishers an inside view of his plans. The only answer to runaway inflation in a rapidly expanding war economy, he insisted, was to nail down the ceiling and sit on it. "Some of you," he said finally, "probably came here thinking that inflation is the only healthy answer. So we will break off for 10 minutes and give those who still feel that way a chance to leave the room."

Nobody left. The invitation to depart had been regarded as tantamount to a request to walk out on the country. "All right," Gordon said. "We'll go ahead on the assumption that everybody present accepts the basic credo of controls and ceilings." From that moment forward, not one Canadian paper spoke so much as a sentence in criticism of the ceiling policy, as such. Even newspapers violently opposed to the Administration went along.

"When you run into something you don't like or consider unfair," Gordon told the publishers, "phone me personally and let's talk it over." When letters of complaint reached his desk, no pinch-hitting executive assistant dictated answers for the boss to sign. The pungent *nature of replies left no* doubt in recipients' minds as to the identity of the author. Gordon knew the control policy's only hope of success was country-wide team play, and to get it he had to have a friendly press. "They were swell," he recalls. "Everybody knew I didn't want any part of the czar business and they were sorry for me. The newspapers figured that since we were all working for the country, we'd better work together and get the war won as soon as we could. We got along fine."

A little later, with OPA on the drafting table, Washington asked Ottawa if Canada's Prices Board chairman could drop around and look things over. The first port of call, after going over the blueprints with OPA boss Leon Henderson, was the White House, where Gordon promptly fell under the spell of President Roosevelt, but was never hypnotized to the point of forgetting to speak his mind. "In five minutes," he says, "I felt as if I had known the man all my life." In the sixth he was talking to the President of the United States as if he had. "You can never make a thing like this work in a democratic society," he said in effect, "if *you lead it with snafu. And if you want the* co-operation of business, you have to let business name its own policemen."

This was precisely what Gordon had done in Canada. In setting up control of, say, metals, he sent for the leaders of the mining and metallurgical industries and said, "Go into the next room and pick the man you want. He'll be your controller." One result was that industrialists had confidence in the controls system from the outset, because every group had its own man sitting inside. Another, which Gordon likes to point out with a chuckle, is that when any industry yipped about the deal it was getting, he had a ready-made retort: "My God! Is one of your own boys doing *that* to you?"

After Pearl Harbor, with the U.S. and Canada merged as war partners and the two economies closely meshed, Henderson and Gordon functioned as "opposite numbers" in their respective countries, in what the latter describes as one of the "happiest explosive relationships" he has ever had.

Between bouts with Washington, spells of smoothing down industry's pinfeathers and labor leaders' short hairs, and keeping his press contacts sweet, Gordon operated as the man between the Canadian government and the people in practically everything related to the war economy. This was a novel practice in a country where policy statements had always been made by elected Cabinet members.

Occasional critics asked how come a citizen not responsible to the electorate for his job was being allowed to make up policy as he went along. Gordon invariably back-cracked that he wasn't doing anything of the kind, but simply giving effect to overall policies set up when the government hitched him to its controls wagon. Others claimed he had become the politicians' triggerman, firing the bullets which could embarrass the politicos, come election time.

Annoyed—but Cheerful

Although many phases of the complex war society annoyed the chairman of WPTB, he always professed to find such criticisms cheering. "It all goes to show you can't keep democracy down, even in wartime," he used to tell friends, "and what else are we supposed to be fighting for?"

If his job was unique in Canadian administrative annals, so was his technique for dealing with the people. Consistently he eschewed the bureaucrats' habit of meeting any crisis head on with a press handout, an off-the-record conference, or an oblique phrased directive. When Gordon had things on his mind, he went to the nearest microphone and talked to the nation in blunt but homey phrase, *and his auditors loved the* feeling that they were being taken behind the curtain.

At his urging, the housewife became a policewoman to rout out black marketeers and ceiling busters. The miscreants they tracked down were tossed into the courts, which dealt out extremely short shrift—part of a campaign to make people believe the price ceiling existed to protect the great law-abiding majority, which was the chairman's own estimate of it.

At war's end he could point to a Canadian economy in which the black market was infinitesimal, goods fairly distributed, hoarding practically nonexistent. The overall wartime rise in living costs had been

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